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ABSTRACT

In 1984 Australia's federal government decided to reactivate the Curriculum Development Centre, an agency abandoned in the early 1980's for political and economic reasons. This paper examines the context in which the center currently acts and the operations that it conducts. The paper first considers background issues related to national curriculum development, including the respective roles of the national and state governments in education, the needs of various client groups, and the relative value of producing instructional materials rather than seeking broader goals. The next section of the paper discusses and presents examples of three basic approaches to national curriculum development: (1) identification and national dissemination of successful local practices; (2) the development of national consensus on curricular topics; and (3) the attraction of national attention to problems or issues of common concern. The paper concludes with a brief review of the practical steps necessary to ensure adequate communication between the national center and local delivery systems or practitioners. The importance of maintaining a sense of partnership among those affected is stressed. (PGD)

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RECONCEPTUALISING EFFORTS AT NATIONAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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This paper has been prepared for presentation at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 16-20 1986.

INTRODUCTION

Local control over curriculum development has been an important feature of education systems in the USA, Great Britain and Australia. Yet the curriculum reform movement of the 1960's and 1970's witnessed considerable effort at the national level in an attempt to harnass national resources to improve the quality of education. The Course Content Improvement program of the National Science Foundation in the United States and the projects of the Schools Council in Great Britain and the Curriculum Development Centre in Australia provide ample evidence of the scope of national initiatives. By the early 1980's, however, severe restrictions had been placed on such activities and it seemed, for a time at least, that local rather than national needs would determine the direction of future curriculum change.

The reasons for the withdrawal of support from national efforts were both political and economic. Gideonese (1981) has highlighted the loss of political support for national curriculum development in the United States as a result of the MACOS controversy. A similar trend could be identified in Australia in relation to the Social Education Materials Project although there is little evidence of the direct impact this had on the final decision relating to the fate of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). In Australia, there was a more

general concern at the Federal level to reduce expenditure in non-essential areas. An expenditure review committee recommended the winding down of CDC unless cost sharing arrangements could be made with the governments of the States. When such arrangements were not forthcoming, Federal funds were withdrawn and the activities of the Centre were severely curtailed. To the political and economic reasons must be added the general point made by Aitken and House (1981) in the United States context that Federal involvement in curriculum development simply had not been able to demonstrate any more than minimal impact. In other words, national efforts had not been able to build the kind of constituency that could provide the necessary support when it was needed.

The lessons learnt from these first attempts at national curriculum development would remain somewhat theoretical if there were to be no further national curriculum activities. In 1984, however, the Australian Federal government decided to reactivate the Curriculum Development Centre. Clearly, a 'second generation' national curriculum agency will need to learn from the past. In particular, it will have to operate in such a way as to ensure that its activities are valued by a broadly based constituency while at the same time making a significant contribution to the discussion and dissemination of important educational issues. The purposes of this paper are to indicate the current context and operations of Australia's

most recent phase of national curriculum development and suggest some possible models that might be applicable elsewhere.

SOME BACKGROUND ISSUES RELATING TO NATIONAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The constitutional realities of the Australian federal system of government provide an important background for understanding the context of national initiatives in curriculum development. Under the Australian constitution, Education is an activity retained as a responsibility of the States. While there has been increasing Federal involvement in all aspects of Education in the post- World War II period, State governments and their bureaucracies retain a keen interest in defending States' rights in the area. This is particularly so in regard to curriculum since the States operate the main delivery systems that provide schooling for the majority of Australian students. Initiatives that appear to be imposing a Federal policy initiative or ignoring the expressed needs of the States rarely rate much chance of success.

In this context, to talk exclusively of Federal initiatives in curriculum is in the end self-defeating. Rather, it has been suggested that national activities should be redefined to mean those activities that encompass the objectives of both State and Federal governments (Tannock, 1984). In practical terms

this means that for any initiative to proceed, it has to involve a joint agreement that the activity is beneficial to the nation as a whole. In this situation, a partnership is created so that all groups can feel some ownership over the activity being undertaken and can share in its success.

The concept of partnership is an attempt to overcome constitutional problems relating to national curriculum development. It is nevertheless a fragile concept that requires constant nurturing. At the same time, Aitken and House (1981) have raised a further problem. They argued that one of the reasons for the failure of Federal curriculum development efforts in the United States was the use of a centre-periphery model. Such a model, it was argued, led to the cultural alienation of teachers who were never able to feel that the resulting products were designed for their specific teaching situations. Thus what was planned to be the great strength of externally developed products - the use of eminent scholars and educators along with reliance on the latest technology - turned out to be a positive disadvantage when it came to actual classroom use of the materials.

A recent description of an Australian curriculum initiative has made a similar point (Christie, 1985). The Language Development Project was one of three national projects in which the Curriculum Development Centre was involved between 1973 and

1981. The model used in the project has been described in fairly traditional terms as that of research, development and dissemination (Christie, 1985). The problem of clearly differentiating between these three phases soon became clear, especially the need for early dissemination:

> There can be no clear cut distinction between development and dissemination, as was envisaged in the original plan. Developmental activity must build a context, and an awareness, of the curriculum principles being generated, otherwise those principles and the materials in which they find expression risk not being taken up. (p.157)

For a national project this represents a particular problem since not only must teachers be convinced by the new materials but education system managers as well. In most cases it is such managers who hold either the authority or the finances that can sanction the new product. It was for this reason that the Language Development project worked towards a 'national consensus' on language development - it needed to have a good working relationship with State education systems and could not be seen to be imposing views that were out of line with existing policies. The success of such an approach will never been known since the decision to withdraw CDC funding ended the project prematurely.

Nevertheless, the model of co-operative national curriculum development practised by the Language Development Project provides clear guidelines for operating in the national

context. There are a range of client groups - State systems, Independent school systems, professional associations, community groups, teachers and students - all of whom have a stake in curriculum. As Christie (1985) so rightly discerned, the task of CDC was - and I would maintain still is - to mark out for itself an identity that is at once distinctive and responsive. Lessons from the past will clearly be helpful, but new approaches will also need to be explored.

One such approach may well have to do with questioning the relationship between curriculum development and materials production. The three major national initiatives in curriculum development in Australia - the Australian Science Education Project, the Social Education Materials Project and the Language Development Project - all saw materials as their major outcome. This was also the case with many of the overseas projects. Yet materials are quite idiosyncratic to their designers and unless accompanied by extensive inservice education they may never be used as intended. Curriculum materials themselves may have the potential to bring about changes in teachers and students yet there is little systematic evidence that they actually do so (Elliott, 1983; Marsh, 1984; Kennedy, 1985). Thus renewed attempts at national curriculum development may not necessarily be focussed on the production of materials.

In general, then, national curriculum development in Australia must take into considertion a range of quite substantial issues. The constitutional difficulties represent the biggest structural problem and must be handled sensitively. The needs of client groups must also be considered in a co-operative context that nevertheless allows CDC to make a distinctive contribution to Australian education. Finally, curriculum development activities should not be narrowly confined to materials production. These issues provide a framework in which to consider current initiatives in national curriculum development in Australia.

RECONCEPTUALISING EFFORTS AT NATIONAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Three basic approaches to current efforts in national curriculum development can be identified. One has to do with identifying exemplary local practice and making it available nationally. A second is concerned to bring about a national consensus on a particular topic or area as a basis for further developments. While a third focuses national attention on a particular problem or issue of common concern. Each of these will be explained with reference to specific examples.

1. Identifying exemplary local practice and making it available nationally

The reasons for highlighting successful local practice were pointed out in a recent report on dissemination strategies relating to successful innovation (Crandall and Loucks, 1982). It can avoid the gap that is often created between externally designed products and teachers needs and promotes what works rather than something that is untried and untested. In the Australian context, the reasons are even more compelling. In terms of resources, the bulk of Australian funds devoted to curriculum development is provided by Education Departments and Independent school systems in the States. For national efforts to either duplicate local efforts or attempt to compete with them is both wasteful of resources and inefficient. Rather, every attempt should be made to capitalise on local successes so that they can be shared across the nation. Such a view has led to three different but related approaches to making exemplary practices available nationally:

(a) Identifying system-initiated practice

Education systems invest a great deal of money in promising new initiatives. This was certainly so in the case of the Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC)

which cost in excess of $300,000 in its development phase. Successfully piloted in a single region of South Australia, ELIC had won a considerable amount of local support. Thus, when the Curriculum Development Council (the policy making group that advises the Federal Minister for Education on curriculum issues and directs the activities of the Curriculum Develoment Centre) highlighted language learning as a priority area, one of its options was to provide support for ELIC so that it could be adopted on a national scale. In the end, that decision was made and funds were provided to allow ELIC to be made available nationally in 1985. Funds were provided by the Curriculum Development Centre and the National Committee of the Participation and Equity Program.

Under the arrangements made with States, national co-ordination of ELIC provided a training course to enable participants from each State to develop skills as ELIC trainers. On return to his/her State, the trainers provided courses for teachers. While the cost of "training the trainers" was met from Federal funds, the cost of local training was the responsibility of local authorities. In this way, what had essentially been a local initiative was disseminated to all Australian States.

So successful was this program, that towards the end of 1985 a funding request was made for a further year of national co-ordination. CDC was unable to meet the request but undertook to play a broker's role by securing funds from elsewhere. In the end, the National Committee of the Participation and Equity Program provided 50% of the budget while the remaining 50% was provided on a student per capita basis by participating systems. This cost-sharing arrangement was a firm indication of the success of ELIC as a national initiative.

Throughout 1986 an evaluation will attempt to highlight those aspects of ELIC that have made it successful as a national effort. Clearly the political and economic climate with its emphasis on 'back to basics' and the need for a skilled work force has had a powerful effect. Yet it is also important to try and identify those componenets of ELIC that have had a positive effect on teachers and students. This will enable further initiatives to benefit from what appears to have been an outstanding success in terms of its acceptability to groups across the nation and the willingness of States and systems to invest their own money in it.

(b) Identifying classroom practice

Rather than look at system-initiated practice, the Mathematics Curriculum and Teaching Project (MCTP) has focussed on classroom practice that can be shared across the nation. A project team has been appointed with the task of establishing networks of interested teachers and professionals who can trial and evaluate classroom practices that can then be made available in a national data bank.

The MCTP is in a formative stage with the first year having been devoted to network building. It has been necessary for the team to move around the country so that teachers can learn about the project and be encouraged to contribute to it. The emphasis is on providing systems of support for teachers so that professional development is seen as a natural partner of curriculum development. As a recent project newsletter pointed out:

> MCTP is not merely producing exemplary products. Rather it is providing vehicles for teachers to assess, in their own classrooms and in association with their own colleagues, the nature and reality of features of teaching and learning with which they have not previously been experienced or confident.

A special concern of MCTP is for groups who traditionally have been disadvantaged by the ways in which mathematics is

currently taught. These include girls, Aborigines, non-English speaking students, the less able and the gifted. In collecting exemplary teaching activities special emphasis is placed on the extent to which such activities can cater for the needs of these groups. Again, the focus is as much professional development as curriculum development. Teachers who contribute to the data bank of activities are encouraged to reflect and evaluate their materials and when these are disseminated more widely it is expected that the same processes will be applied by teachers using the materials.

The project to date represents a diverse range of activities located in different States and Territories. Eventually the best of these will be brought together for national dissemination. In the meantime, teachers are being supported in their local efforts and drawn together in a national network. Evaluation of both the process and the products will indicate just how successful such an approach can be.

(c) Supporting Promising Practice

Another example of basing national curriculum efforts on existing practice is the Australian Language Levels (ALL) Project. Like ELIC, ALL was initiated at the system level

but lack of funds meant that it was unable to be implemented. When CDC was approached it was able to provide funds to allow the value of the project to be assessed by groups around the country. Even though the proposal was highly theoretical, concerned with defining communicative competencies for students learning a language other than English, there was widespread agreement that it was worth pursuing. It was subsequently supported by the Curriculum Development Council because of its potential to inform practice in the language teaching area.

Thus national curriculum efforts can rely on local practice at a number of levels including large scale system initiated practices and classroom practices. In addition, where promising practices can be identified and where they have the support of groups across the country, then a national initiative can assist with development costs. This highlights the role of a national curriculum agency as a facilitator, a broker and a promoter without making it overly intrusive or interventionist. It is able to build on what exists and in so doing ensures support for its activities.

2. Seeking to Build a National Consensus

In some subject areas there needs to be a considerable amount of preparation before specific work can be

undertaken. This applied particularly to the arts area with its range of components (performance, visual and written) and with previous national efforts still in mind (Keeping, 1980). In this context it was decided to convene a national seminar that would bring together groups and individuals who could advise on possible directions for a national effort and who could contribute to an agenda that would have positive benefits for teachers and students.

Such a seminar was held in mid- 1985. Representatives of education systems, professional associations, teacher education and arts bodies were invited. A range of issues was considered over a three day period. These included the problems of national policy implementation, identifying areas of need in arts education, the relationship between arts and employment opportunities, between arts and daily living, and between arts and Australian culture. These topics were considered exhaustively by all participants and recommendations were made for future action.

The recommendations from the seminar were considered by the Arts Advisory Committee of the Curriculum Development Councila and final recommendations were made to Council. The result was the setting up of a National Arts in Australian School Project that had three main foci:

- Arts and the young child
- Arts and youth culture
- Assessing the educational impact of arts-funded education projects.

The project will run for two years using the network created by the seminar as an important means of disseminating results and retaining national support.

3. Identifying Issues of National Concern

The approaching bicentennary of European settlement in Australia has stimulated the development of a national education program. Part of that program is concerned with assessing the Australian studies component of existing school curricula and developing resources to fill in identified gaps. The Curriculum Development Centre has undertaken responsibility for this project and is in the process of identifyng needs in Australian studies.

Coming under the aegis of CDC has meant the project, entitled Australian Studies School Project, has adopted a collaborative process with local education systems. A review of existing school curricula has been conducted, a national review conference has been held and recommendations are about to be made to the Curriculum

Development Council. For the first time, a comprehensive attempt will be made to promote Australian content across elementary and secondary school curricula.

While it has been possible to identify distinctive approaches to national curriculum development - dissemination of exemplary practice, seeking a national consensus and identifying issues of national concern - the approaches have one thing in common. Fundamental to all of them is the notion of co-operative curriculum development. In no case has there been an attempt to impose a program on local systems or to intervene directly at the local level. Negotiation and deliberation characterise the processes that have been used to date. By this means, commitment rather than compliance has become the mechanism for undertaking national curriculum development efforts.

Another feature of the three approaches is the reliance on outcomes other than new curriculum materials. The Early Literacy Inservice Course and the Mathematics Curriculum and Teaching Project have a heavy emphasis on the professional development of teachers. The Australian Language Levels Project will produce syllabus guidelines that will guide the construction of curriculum in a diverse range of languages other than English. The National Arts in Australian Schools Project will investigate a number of

key issues with the emphasis being on the dissemination of results to an arts network throughout Australia. The Australian Studies School project will most likely concentrate as much on professional development as resource development. No longer can curriculum development be equated with materials development. Rather, it must be viewed as a much more complex process incorporating principles relating to the dissemination and implementation of both new ideas and well tried practices.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM RECENT NATIONAL CURRICULUM EFFORTS IN AUSTRALIA

National curriculum development cannot be undertaken in a context that is isolated from delivery systems and the needs of teachers. This involves, in the first place, advisory mechanisms that provide a national curriculum agency with input from the systems level. In the case of the curriculum Development Centre, this task is performed by the Curriculum Development Council. Second, there is a need for advice from experts and professionals in the field. Increasingly, this task is being performed by a range of Advisory Committees. Third, is the need for input from practitioners and such a task is increasingly being undertaken by national review conferences. Fourth, is the need for the appointment of a project team that has the ability to stay in touch with

teachers and build networks of support for project activities. This process in relation to the Curriculum Development Centre can be shown diagrammatically:

Curriculum Development Council	Provides policy advice
Advisory Committee	Expert advice on particular subject areas
Review Conference	Advice on local level concerns
Project Teams	Liaison with systems and teachers to ensure support.

No longer is national curriculum development in Australia based on the assumption that national needs can be superimposed on local needs. Rather the emphasis is on generating support for national initiatives by targeting activities towards identified local needs. In this way it is hoped that classic implementation problems highlighted by the Rand Study (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978) can be avoided and that national needs can be aligned with local needs. The long-term success of such an approach has yet to be evaluated but at the present moment there is evidence of support for it across the country. It seems clear that such support will continue as long as national efforts are characterised as partnerships designed to provide for the needs of all participants.

Note: For a fuller description of individual projects referred to in this paper see Curriculum Development in Australian Schools, No 1, June 1985.

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